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A Spy Stays Out in the Cold

James Angleton is
no longer with the Company,
but he keeps his hand in

by Jeff Stein

It was the kind of afternoon in Washington, D.C., when the city seems to have turned into the capital of a banana republic. Rumors of another coup in the higher levels of government swept out of the press rooms, across Capitol Hill and into the restaurants and bars last week. There had been reports that the deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency and 20 other top operatives in the CIA's Clandestine Services Branch had been purged.

Working on the telephone in a quiet corridor of a private club two blocks from the White House, James Angleton — one of the agency's most feared men for 31 years and its counter-intelligence chief until 1975 — was trying to find out what had happened. He looked grim.

"I'm told that the reporter is reliable," he said a few minutes later, slipping into a chair in the Army-Navy Club's cocktail lounge and pulling a photostat of the original UPI story from his breast pocket. "If it's true, and if no cause is shown, no cause that is satisfactory to the cadres, then it'll be damaging, very damaging."

The reported purge began to stir the old man's memories of a similar day in the spring of 1975, when he himself had been unceremoniously dumped after the appearance of a series of newspaper reports describing his role as the head of a massive spying operation directed at American citizens. Two years later, the memory was still a bitter one.

"I'm still decompressing, and will be

for some time," he said, lighting the first of the 18 Virginia Slims he would smoke during the next two-and-a-half hours. His firing he says, was "a complete pulling of the rug, and what emerged in the next couple months was the deceptions they had worked upon us, and lies — and to have that from your own people is a little difficult to swallow."

There were widespread reports that Angleton had not really been ousted because of the domestic-intelligence controversy, but because he had built up too powerful an empire within the CIA and had quietly warred against the Nixon-Kissinger strategy of detente with the USSR.

"Don't ask me that question, because I have too many stories to tell and too many statements to make with people who knew about many meetings which I never knew," he said with uncharacteristic sharpness. "And some day I'll write about that last meeting I had with Colby." Former CIA Director William Colby (who would himself be fired by President Ford in 1976) told him, Angleton says, that the domestic spying flap would blow over in a couple of days, that Ford would simply be informed the program had ended. Angleton would have to go, of course, but it would be handled delicately. It didn't happen that way. Angleton's wife heard about her husband's fate on the radio.

"Should I write a book someday," Angleton continued, reaching for his rum punch, "it would not be what I call a diagonal nod. You know what I mean by that? I mean, it's not belly-to-belly with the KGB this time. The book would be to advance the cause."

He calls it a cause. But others in or close to the intelligence community see it as James Angleton's hand reaching back from the grave. "He is a time bomb," said one agent who understandably asked that his name not be used. "He knows who did what when."

Angleton's current base of operations is in the offices of the American Security Council, where he has formed the "Security and Intelligence Fund," an organization of former high-ranking military and intelligence officers put together to defend FBI and CIA agents accused by prosecutors of illegal wiretapping, mail intercepts and break-ins. Angleton is the Fund's chairman, former US ambassador to South Vietnam Elbridge Dubrow its president, and Brigadier General (ret.) Robert C. Richardson its secretary-treasurer. Board members include several former agents of the CIA and OSS (the forerunner of the CIA), as well as ex-US Senator George Murphy and former TV reporter Nancy Dickerson.

A fundraising pitch by the group complains that things are "upside down now" with the Carter administration "hiring anti-Vietnam activists who only yesterday were open adversaries of the Department of Justice, the FBI, the military, even the government itself." It warns that "the CIA and FBI have been so badly shattered that they no longer have adequate internal security."

are to recover these, the pitch urges, "they need help now." Those who join the fund get a special reprint of "The Soviet and Communist Bloc Defamation Campaign," which Angleton says is a captured secret KGB plan to destroy the confidence of the Congress and the American people in US intelligence agencies and personnel.

It sounds a bit bizarre, but Angleton leans forward: "I could have named names," he says. Of whom? KGB agents in the government? "Of course," he smiles, reaching for the rum. How high? "I won't go into that," he retreats, "but it was the kind of problem Mondale and Church faced me with, with their insulting diatribes." Angleton received a rough going-over by Senator Frank Church's Intelligence Committee, which was investigating the CIA's abuse of its charter. "It would've been a very cheap shot," he continued, "but I could have begun to name names and had the press corps running to the phones, and I could have backed up those allegations to the great harm of all those people." The allegations, it turns out later, are the standard slings and arrows of the far right: that if someone flirted with the Communist Party in the 1930s, he became a Soviet agent. Angleton declines, even after this admission is extracted, to "name names."

If the government continues to press its campaign against FBI and CIA agents, however, Angleton intends to strike back in their defense. Knowledge about break-ins aimed at the Socialist Workers Party and other Left groups, he says, was widespread within the CIA. "The files and letters are there," he charges. "I took a very strong stand against our Inspector General, director of security, and certain FBI people who attacked their own organizations, kowtowed to the Church Committee and started apologizing. Well, I have all their letters saying 'Keep the governor, don't keep the governor on the watch list,' and so on, 'Put so-and-so, don't put so-and-so on the watch list.' So if I wanted to go into court, which the Church Committee did not want to do, I can subpoena all those letters and let the thing hit the fan, and the destructive side of it would be enormous."

Would he help send top officials of the CIA and FBI to jail in order to protect the field agents, who were "just carrying out orders"? "No," he answers, "I don't think they should be (sent to jail). They were keeping on top of the situation of the day." No one, he thinks, should be imprisoned. The domestic spying was part of "the inherent powers of the administration."

Has the Security and Intelligence Fund, now in its third month of business, been successful? "We've got a lot of lists, and a lot of friends," he says without explanation, "but it's too early to tell."

He says he spends varying amounts of time at the office, that his is not a full-time job, but "intensive when it need be," such as during the time spent getting out the fundraising letter. Quite a decline in power. "Do you think power is anything?" he grunts, leaning over his drink. "You want to fail around this place?"

The bitterness seeps to the surface again. "I've been offered many jobs since I left the government, many offers in six figures. . . Hollywood requests for scripts. . . but if you've worked for 31 years for one company it's hard to work for another." Old friendships have dissolved, or been altered. "I still have friends there, but I don't want to burden them, because I don't want them to have to write a memorandum for the record (if they make contact). But I wish them well, and I try to help them. . . when anything comes across my horizon that would be useful." Does he write memos for his friends on the inside? "I have ways of communicating," he allows, ever the operator.

On the day Angleton was fired, he says, "They impounded everything. They took my deputy, had him — which was an insult to him — made him responsible for impounding all my material. He worked for me for 30 years, and I think it had something to do with his leaving."

He pauses, stirs the rum punch with the long straws. "I won't get involved with a salary as long as I'm in this state of mind." What state is that?

"Decompressing," he repeats, looking up from the table, sheepish. "When you've seen everything you've tried to do for 31 years go down the drain in a hurry . . . and I've seen so many broken families of people who've worked for me for so many years in the agency, the disillusionments and so on, and I share their feelings. . ." There were rumors that Angleton went on a drinking binge after he was fired. The counter-intelligence chief one day, he was caught staggering in the doorway by CBS News cameras the next. He concedes that it was a difficult period, and says his health is "adequate" now. Thoughts of the "capitulators" — Ford, Kissinger and Colby — occupy him these days.

"An organization must be feared to be effective," he says of the intelligence world. "It doesn't mean you do fearful things, but it does mean you must be respected. In other words, you're given credit for things you never did, but you don't say you didn't do it." Even agents on the CIA payroll "must fear you, and

feel that you're omnipresent, and that therefore they better not betray you, or you'll know. Part of the fig leaf was taken off by Church. You don't have to be a big service to be respected, but when a big service is not respected, there are consequences, very big consequences . . . of image and respect, and I think that's what has been lost."

Angleton's home, a little over two miles from Washington in the Virginia suburbs, is full of the mementos from a scholar's life. Only the signed picture of Richard Helms on the mantelpiece ("To Jim, the nonpareil among all the pros") documents the master agent's past. His living room is, in fact, a perfect stage for a performance. There are the pictures and portraits of his children and wife, and the picture of Ezra Pound, once a close friend, over an archway. There are reminders of his friendship with e.e. cummings and admiration for T.S. Eliot. He will talk of *Moby Dick* as the greatest American novel, and of his wife's dogged pursuit of a PhD in medieval studies.

A photo session scheduled to last ten minutes lasts 90. He serves gin-and-tonics and retrieves photo albums of fishing expeditions to Quebec and hunting trips to the edge of the Arctic Circle. And it is fishing, especially trout fishing, which takes him to the bookshelf as he expands on what is obviously more than a sport for him. There are four shelves of books on the art of catching a trout.

Pulling down a favorite volume, he explains how unimportant it is, after all, actually to catch one. "It doesn't matter whether you hook him," he says of the elusive fish, whose favorite hiding place is in the dark shadows under the river's banks. "It only matters when he takes the line, even if he later drops it, that you've beaten him. And he knows he's been beaten. That's the whole point of the game."

Late in the afternoon, when he had begun to tire of talking, James Angleton would admit that the old habits are hard to drop. Does he sometimes think he might be a target of the KGB even now? Did he still keep an eye on the rearview mirror, or change taxis in the midst of a short trip across town? "I'm so blown," he answered slowly, "that that's not part of it." He stared at the table for a moment, and then looked up over the bifocals. "There are some things that bother me from time